DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 757 SP 039 131

AUTHOR Richards, Janet C.
TITLE Infusing Diversity in Teacher Education: A Blossoming Grass Roots Movement in South Mississippi.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.; Produced with Nancy B. Masztal, Teresa Callahan, Shirley Bowles, Eric Luce, and Sara Jackson.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consciousness Raising; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Pluralism; Disabilities; *Diversity (Faculty); Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Minority Groups; Multicultural Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; Student Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS University of Southern Mississippi

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a teacher education program at the University of Southern Mississippi, Long Beach designed to prepare future teachers for diversity so they can successfully meet the challenges of educating all students in the 21st century. The program provides significant and varied opportunities for education majors to develop appreciation for diversity, cultural pluralism, and social equality through alternative experiences that will help them build meaningful relationships between curriculum and life. Students engage in experiences that familiarize them with diverse cultures in the United States; conduct self-analysis and self-reflection on personal biases; develop an awareness of personal heritage and culture; and cultivate expertise in meeting the needs of all students. This paper describes some of the program's courses, including Foundations of Multicultural Education; Reading and Language Arts Field-Based Methods Courses: A School-Family-University Literacy Project; and Psychology and Education of the Exceptional Individual. It also describes other activities, including the Toy Library and Technology Center, which serve children and youth with disabilities, and the National Dance Institute Residency, where racially and economically diverse students learn from master teachers of dance. Finally, the paper describes program evaluation and lessons learned. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

J. Richards

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Infusing Diversity in Teacher Education: A Blossoming Grass Roots Movement in South Mississippi

Janet C. Richards
with Nancy B. Masztal, Teresa R. Callahan, Shirley Bowles, Eric Luce, and Sara Jackson
University of Southern Mississippi, Long Beach, MS 39560

ED 441 757

Two catalysts served as the impetus for this comprehensive teachereducation department research project. 1) Our 1998 "NRC Study Group" inquiry devoted to multicultural issues disclosed that contrary to our assumptions, preservice teachers throughout the United States and in Canada who completed a researcher-devised questionnaire (Richards, 1998) were not well informed about teaching students from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities; and 2) The October, 1999, call from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education urged teacher preparation departments to document their initiatives infusing diversity into their programs.

" I just realized that I have never really worked with a diverse group of people. I went to school in a Catholic, mostly white school here on the Mississippi coast. There were two or three African American students in the entire school!! I found it fascinating at the time that African American kids were even in my class. I know that sounds like the dark ages. It's a shame that I do not have more background concerning diversity but I am surely looking forward to working with a diverse group of students in our literacy early field placement. I am ready to broaden my horizons as a preservice teacher (preservice teacher's journal excerpt, August 12, 1999)

"You ask me if this class has changed my perceptions? Well, I used to overlook ... you might even say ignore students' cultural identities. I didn't know what to do with something like that. Now, I relish everyone's cultural distinctiveness. I ask them about their ethnicity and I am so curious about their customs and thinking. I am also beginning to understand the sociocultural contexts of students' language and literacy development" (preservice teacher's response to an exit interview in the course, Foundations of Multicultural Education, May, 1999)

"I never knew there was discrimination against people with disabilities.

SP039131

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Arthur, the 32 year-old man with whom I work, has cerebral palsy and he cannot talk. He also must use a wheelchair to go anywhere. Yet, he is so motivated to learn to read and write. He even takes the special bus all by himself. What a joy it is to work with him" (preservice teacher's portfolio reflections, October, 1999)

We are six teacher educators who work in a small teacher education department in south Mississippi.* Five of us are white and one of us is African American. The reality of racial segregation in schools in the south kept generations of white and African American students in Mississippi separate from each other. Equally serious, in 1975, a class action law suit had to be filed with the intent of confronting, and hopefully eradicating prejudicial and discriminatory practices toward Mississippi African American school children who were misclassified by their IQ scores as needing special education services (Holloday versus Mattie T., 1975). Recruitment of faculty and students of color has been difficult in our department. Perhaps our efforts are obstructed by previous realities of racial segregation in our state. In addition, until recently, classes attended by predominately white education majors were taught on campus by predominately white professors. Lecture topics and seminar discussions did not deal adequately with issues related to variations in language, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical and mental exceptionalities. No formal plan, even at the department level, was in place for infusing diversity into our undergraduate teacher education programs. We are proud to state that over the past four years, we have entered into a serious, determined, collaborative grassroots movement that considers the incorporation of diversity issues to be crucial to our teacher preparation persona. Working together, we have gradually developed a cohesive theoretical framework that focuses on encompassing all aspects of diversity into our elementary, special education, secondary teacher education, and outreach programs in the community. For example, each of our preservice teachers now studies diversity issues in a required course entitled, "Foundations of Multicultural Education". We also offer seven field-based courses where preservice teachers who are always supervised by their professors, work twice weekly in schools in which 50- 95 percent of the students are nonmainstream and the majority receive government-subsidized meals, a common indicator of poverty. In addition, we author numerous grants to operate a highly successful Toy Library and Technology Center, fragrance

* The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast is a regional campus. The main campus is located in Hattiesburg, MS.

garden, and playground that are designed to meet the special needs of children with disabilities in the community. Further, we planned, implemented and manage the USM Gulf Coast Early Childhood Center, a preschool for two, three, and four-year-olds that connects children and their families from multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds through the visual and performing arts. Reaching deeper into the surrounding community, we work with nonmainstream students and their parents through affiliations with Headstart programs, community parent resource centers (Title 1), and a five-year Knight Foundation mathematics grant. Grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Mississippi Council of the Arts allow us to collaborate with the National Dance Institute of New York to provide a two week summer dance workshop for middle grade students. Our goal is to reach families who are not able to afford dance lessons for their children.
We recognize that we still have a considerable amount of work to do to create a comprehensive learning community that is devoted to cultivating and nurturing diversity. However, we believe that our grassroots story as stated here, might provide inspiration and useful information for other small teacher preparation departments who wish to move forward toward infusing diversity intotheir teacher education programs. In addition, the information may prove helpful for colleges of education that have little variations in their student or faculty populations because of geographic location (e.g., in Maine, New Hampshire, and Salt Lake City, Utah).
We submit the following conceptual framework, descriptions of our programs, assessment techniques, reflections, and supporting documentation for your consideration. The materials confirm our commitment to inculcating and celebrating diversity in all of our teacher preparation programs in our deep south location, with limited faculty, and with the reality of a student body that is 86 percent white.

Conceptual Framework:
Goal, Mission, Experiences, and Opportunities
The goal of our teacher preparation program is to prepare future teachers to courageously, knowledgeably, and successfully meet the challenges of educating all students in the twenty-first century. Current demographic statistics show that in the millennium, 51 percent of the United States

population will be considered nonmainstream and will come from homes where languages other than English are spoken (United States Department of Education, Office of Statistics, 1990). Thus, our mission is to provide significant and varied opportunities for education majors to develop appreciation for diversity, cultural pluralism, and social equality through alternative experiences that will help them build "meaningful relationships between curriculum and life" (Pang, 1992, p. 67) (also see Diaz, 1992 and Hobbs, 1997). Critical to our goal and mission, we strive to engage our preservice teachers in experiences that assist them to: 1) become familiar with the history and cultural heritage of minority populations in the United States; 2) engage in self analysis and reflection of personally-held biases, prejudices, and stereotype perceptions;3) develop an awareness of personal heritage and culture and; 4) cultivate expertise in meeting the learning needs, multiple intelligences, and interests of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Concurrently, in order to meet the individualized learning requirements of all students, including students with exceptionalities (i.e., special education students), our purpose is to prepare future teachers to successfully meet the challenges of educating students whose cognitive, social, physical, and emotional needs may differ from the norm. This involves providing education majors with significant and varied opportunities to learn how to: 1) create a safe, supportive learning environment in which diversity is valued and supported; 2) develop instructional content andstrategies that respond to cultural, linguistic, and gender differences; 3) incorporate strategies that consider the characteristics and effects of the cultural environment of students, including cultural and linguistic diversity and; 4) include family and community in teaching and learning.

Specific Program Descriptions

Foundations of Multicultural Education (offered every semester, this is a required course for all preservice teachers)

In this required course, preservice teachers explore the definition of the term,'multicultural', the dimensions of culture, and the contexts in which culture is defined. Preservice teachers proceed through a series of steps or activities to gain a better understanding of the complexities of multicultural education. Major objectives of the course are: 1) involving preservice teachers in becoming familiar with the major cultures on the Mississippi Gulf Coast; 2) helping preservice teachers understand prejudice

and discrimination through the sharing of personal stories and reflections as either victim or perpetrator; 3) challenging preservice teachers to apply information gleaned in the course to themselves and to others and; 4) providing opportunities for preservice teachers to examine and reflect upon their beliefs and practices in order to rethink their conceptualizations of multicultural education. A mix of pedagogical strategies are used, including small group discussions, videos, interviews, surveys, and immersion field projects involving visits throughout the semester to nonmainstream families and communities. In the past two semesters, 67 preservice teachers have matriculated through this course.

Reading and Language Arts Field-Based Methods Courses: A School-Family-University Literacy Project

Most teacher education school-based partnerships are formed primarily to benefit preservice teachers and students in K-12 schools. This comprehensive collaboration strives to connect classroom teachers, parents, preservice teachers, elementary students, and the Division of Education, USM Gulf Coast, as equal partners in a comprehensive literacy project. Of the 421 students in grades K-six in the host elementary school, 93 percent receive government-subsidized breakfast and lunch; over one-half come from single parent homes; 84 percent are African-Americans and; over 80 percent of the students' standardized reading and language arts test scores fall at or below the 30th percentile. The majority of students live in near-by low income housing.

Each fall and spring semester, after an initial orientation meeting on campus, preservice teachers and their USM professor work two mornings a week (8:00-10:45) in the elementary school. With their professor's guidance, the preservice teachers offer integrated, literature-based literacy lessons that are linked to the arts and technology. The program promotes interaction among all participants through monthly Literacy Meetings where teachers, parents, students, professor, and preservice teachers share their literacy learning experiences, discuss the importance of reading, and talk about good books read and heard. Through these interactive meetings, participants come to know one another on a personal level. For example, one morning, participants shared memories about their ethnic backgrounds, discussed their cultural celebrations, and created charts and graphs that depicted the similarities among participants' cultures. Over the past two years, 129 preservice teachers have matriculated through this program. Family participation at monthly Literacy Meetings is high, with an average of 75

attendees (e.g., mothers, fathers, big brothers, aunts, or neighbors).

Psychology and Education of the Exceptional Individual (a required course for all preservice teachers)
Woven throughout this course is a multicultural strand that ties into federal policies regarding discriminatory practices. A significant amount of time is spent on activities that help preservice teachers appreciate and incorporate diversity into their teaching practices. The course also assists preservice teachers to offer instructional strategies that recognize and celebrate diversity among learners and to create learning environments that maximize opportunities for success for all students. The course infuses 16 objectives relating to multicultural issues that include assisting preservice teachers to: 1) understand how to protect students from discriminatory testing and placement and; 2) develop curricula that is culturally responsive for all students. In the past two years, 124 preservice teachers have matriculated through this course.

Toy Library and Technology Center
Established in 1990, through a start-up grant of $42,000, the highly successful Toy Library and Technology Center is a program designed to serve children and youths with disabilities who reside in the Mississippi Gulf Coast counties. Some of the programs offered include: 1) an extensive toy library that loans adapted toys and specialized play equipment to children with disabilities; 2) a playground accessible for children with disabilities; 3) computers; 4) assistive technology and; 5) augmentative communication training programs and equipment loan for children, teachers, and parents.
The program continues to operate through small grants and donations, United Way support, and support from the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast. In 1998-1999, the center's 90 volunteers assisted 80 professional clients (e.g., social workers, audiologists, physical and occupational therapists), 175 children, 79 teachers, and 280 parents.

National Dance Institute Residency at USM
This program collaborates with a local school district, the National Dance Institute, and USM to provide a two-week dance residency where racially and economically diverse students learn from master teachers of dance. The project provides two weeks of all-day dance instruction for middle school students who, for the most part, cannot afford dance lessons. The state of Mississippi does not have licensure programs for those interested in teaching

dance at the primary or secondary levels. At the same time, low income families usually cannot support their children's dance lessons. Therefore, this program helps to bring the world of dance to economically disadvantaged youths. In the past two years, 135 middle school students have participated in this dance residency.

An Excellence in Education Project sponsored by the John and James Knight Foundation: The USM/Biloxi Collaboration: Implementing the National Council of Teachers Mathematics Standards
The Biloxi, MS, school district has 6,142 students enrolled of which 44 percent are minorities. In this project, USM project staff and Biloxi, MS, teachers work together to redesign the Biloxi, MS, mathematics curriculum to adhere to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards. In addition, the project focuses on increasing parental involvement in the mathematics education of their children. Stemming from the project is a teacher designed guidebook entitled, The Mathematics Curriculum and Activities Guide. The guidebook includes math activities for parents. Family Math, a community outreach component supported by the Knight Foundation grant, had approximately 600 community participants at the district-wide initiative held on October 19, 1999.

The USM Gulf Coast Early Childhood Center: Linking the Visual Arts to Early Education (1998-1999), Linking the Visual Arts to Literacy and Mathematics in Early Education (1999-2000)
This project is supported by the Mississippi Arts Council and offers an early education focus on learning through the visual arts. Professional artists serve a residency at the Early Childhood Center, facilitating multi-sensory and culturally diverse arts experiences for children who are two-to-four years of age. The study of artists and art works provides the framework for the curriculum at the Early Childhood Center and is central to the academic and social development of the children enrolled. Children participate in visual arts classes at least three times per week. Eleven percent of the children represent nonmainstream families Tuition assistance is provided for children from poverty level homes. In the past two years, 91 preschool children have attended the center.

Evaluation/Assessment

Evaluation and assessment of our effectiveness as promoters and supporters of diversity in our small, southern teacher education department are varied and extensive, and depend, in part on specific courses, professors, and/or projects. For example, assessment artifacts may include journals, written reflections, portfolios, individual conferences, pictorial and anecdotal records, teaching cases, case studies, and surveys. Professors carefully study these artifacts for evidences of preservice teachers' growth with respect to working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, our efforts in community outreach programs are documented through statistical analysis of program participation rosters, and observations, and field notes. Elementary students' gains in language and literacy are documented through qualitative measures such as, analysis of their taped oral story retellings, written stories, and dialogue journal entries (see Appendix).

Critical Reflection of Lessons Learned

When we began writing this document, we seriously pondered if we had any significant, interrelated programs in place that were devoted to inculcating diversity. In reality, we are not a large teacher education department and, as noted, our student body is 86 percent white. Further, out of six faculty members, five are white. Moreover, we have only recently organized and solidified our quest toward inculcating and celebrating diversity in our teacher education programs. Yet, authoring this document has validated our efforts that have helped to move us beyond the boundaries of our department and campus into the community. We have discovered that we are not afraid to face, discuss, and work toward ameliorating Mississippi's long standing prejudicial and discriminatory practices toward nonmainstream persons and those with disabilities. In addition, we have learned that we are sincere in our desires to promote and celebrate diversity in south Mississippi. We wholeheartedly believe that through our efforts, we are helping to make a significant positive difference in the lives of nonmainstream young children, students, and families on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We also are enriching our own lives through our connections to the realities of the multicultural world that surrounds us, and in essence, is part of us. Moreover, we believe that our preservice teachers will become superior teachers in the millennium. As our Conceptual Framework states, they will courageously, knowledgeably, and successfully meet the challenges of educating all students in the twenty-first century.

We still have a long way to go toward institutionalizing our 'Blossoming

Grassroots Movement in South Mississippi'. However, we are more than willing to continue to make the journey ahead.Conducting this research has afforded us the opportunity and challenge to document and review our past efforts, and to reflect upon what we must continue to accomplish in the years to come.

References

Diaz, C. (Ed.). (1992). Multicultural education for the 21st century. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Hobbs, R. (1997). Literacy for the informational age. In J. Flood, S Brice Heath, and D. Lapp (Eds.), Research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts (pp. 7-15). Newark, DE: The International Reading Association.

Pang, V. (1992). Institutional climate: Developing an effective multicultural school community. Multicultural education for the 21st century. Washington, DC: National Education Association.